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Sudden Death Memorials in Bucharest: Mortuary Practices and Beliefs in an Urban Context

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Abstract

Since 1989, Bucharest has been subject to a significant increase in the number of memorials erected in places where people have unexpectedly lost their lives. Based on the study of 204 memorials registered between 2000 and 2010 in Bucharest, this paper describes and explains the phenomenon. Furthermore, it argues against the terminology so far used in literature on the subject, which does not fully suit the Romanian case. Memorials in Bucharest must be situated and understood in a complex religious context, in which orthodox traditions regarding death are closely interlinked with remnants of ancient folk practices and beliefs of countrywide origin. Erecting them is part of the pre-established mortuary rituals, related to religious practices and beliefs regarding the soul and the afterlife. Therefore, the new term ‘sudden death memorials’ is instead suggested to designate them, as it refers to the very event that underlies the erection of these particular memorials: sudden, unexpected (and thus unprepared-for) death.

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1. Introduction

Soon after the violent events leading to the fall of communism in 1989, a variety of memorials and monuments dedicated to the ‘heroes of the revolution’ rapidly spread across Bucharest. Some were erected in central places where many had lost their lives, at the initiative of victims’ associations or local authorities eager to show their repentance for past wrongs and solidarity with the bereaved. Others appeared in front of military units which had suffered losses during the violent confrontations and also near churches. Regardless whose initiative was behind the memorials, the same cross-shape was to be seen in all. Little by little the city became studded with crosses: clear markers of the recent political change and the freedom of religious expression that it

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engendered. It is in this context that the more discreet and unofficial cross-shaped memorials also made their appearance in the city centre. Erected by families and friends, they bore a more personal touch by giving out the name, age and occupation of the victims, the circumstances of their death, adding pictures or a few words mentioning the sorrow felt by those left behind. Inspired by these, other memorials soon followed, marking places where people's lives ended under different circumstances, but as unexpectedly as those killed in 1989. Most are dedicated to victims of automobile accidents, but there are also others for victims of more unusual deaths such as falls, electrocutions, strokes, suicides, drowning, and even murders.

Finding suitable terms when referring to these particular memorials is challenging, as the terminology so far used in literature on the subject does not entirely suit the Romanian case. Made out of durable materials and occasionally lasting for over three decades, memorials in Bucharest can hardly be referred to as 'temporary' (Doss 2008), or 'spontaneous' (Santino, 2006, 2010; Haney, Leimer & Lowery, 1997; Doss, 2006). Nor can they be described as '*roadside* memorials' (Henzel, 1991; Everett, 2002; Klaassens, Groote & Huigen, 2009) or '*roadside shrines*' (Kennerly, 2002; Bednar, 2011), since they do not exclusively relate to automobile or traffic accidents and are not always located next to roads. Although they might be included in the broader category of 'vernacular memorials', with reference to their local character, this would only draw attention away from their function and towards their appearance. Moreover, the sometimes excessively broad meaning given to this term (see Maddrell, 2009, pp. 45-46), makes it inoperable. Although situated in the public realm, memorials in Bucharest don't always represent a form of social action, expressing social discontent or protest, as implied by the term 'grassroots memorials' (Margry & Sanchez, 2011, p. 2). Romanian memorials are rather to be considered as a culturally determined response to tragic events. They are part of pre-established mortuary ritual, based on old religious beliefs regarding the wanderings of the soul and the afterlife. As people I interviewed often put it, they are 'something that has to be done'. Considering this, I hereby introduce the alternative term 'sudden death memorials', which I consider more appropriate to the Romanian case study, as it refers to the very event that underlies the erection of memorials: sudden, unexpected (and thus unprepared-for) death.

After a brief presentation of the methodology employed, the distinctive features of the sudden death memorials in Bucharest are brought to light, followed by a description of the main Romanian mortuary practices and beliefs in the case of sudden death. In the conclusions, the choice of the newly proposed term will once more be argued.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on a study conducted between 2000 and 2010, which covered Bucharest, where repeated fieldwork campaigns revealed a total number of 204 sudden death memorials. Although distributed citywide, they are densely packed in certain areas, while being totally lacking in others, as well as apparently being larger in number in the western part of the city (Stahl, 2010). The quantitative data provided information concerning the distribution in space and time of the memorials, but also about the persons to whom they had been erected. More information was gathered from indirect sources such as newspaper articles or directly, from short interviews with people in the area such as shopkeepers, neighbours or passers-by. Longer interviews with priests who had been called upon to bless these memorials, as well as one in-depth interview with two members of a family who had lost two of their loved ones in a car accident and decided to erect a memorial to their memory, provided extra valuable information on the practices and beliefs accompanying this particular type of sudden death. Sudden death memorials in Bucharest are far from being exceptional, as similar memorials are visible all over Romania and, despite a few regional differences, they are very much alike. What is exceptional, however, is the stunning increase in their numbers after 1989.

3. Sudden death memorials in Bucharest

Over the past two decades the spread of sudden death memorials in Bucharest has been considerable. The permissive legislation does not impose sanctions or restrictions on those who install them, either on public or private land. However, fearing that the city might start resembling 'one big cemetery', local authorities have

constantly tried to discourage this. Public opinion is divided on this matter. There are those who find the practice macabre and those who show themselves to be more sympathetic. It is not uncommon to see people cross themselves and mutter a short prayer after looking at the photo or text. Memorials are generally guarded with respect and even protected; to remove them would be considered callous, even sinful. Road workers interviewed have declared they only temporarily remove those situated on the roadside. Nevertheless, a number of the memorials initially registered have disappeared, mainly due to city planning.

Sudden death memorials in Bucharest are mostly crosses (98% of the sample).^a Most are also metal (96.1%), which is long-lasting, cheaply available and durable (3.9% are marble or stone). A significant number (35.8%) are surrounded by protective fences and resemble graves. They are an extension of the ephemeral elements (usually burning candles, flowers, wreaths and photos) left at the scene of a sudden death, soon after it happened.

In most cases, sudden death memorials are manufactured by craftsmen working in the funeral market which explains the high degree of homogeneity in design and the similarity with gravestones. The bereaved usually purchase the memorials and install them within the month of the death. They take care to maintain them over time, cleaning, painting and sometimes even replacing them. Many are regularly adorned with flowers or seasonal ornaments (especially around Christmas). Burning candles or oil lamps are often lit next to them. Some memorials even feature special candle-holders, lanterns or small benches for visitors. More personal objects are rather rare.

With a few exceptions (mainly due to deterioration in time), the memorials are inscribed with the full name of the deceased, as well as dates for birth and death. Additional information, such as the circumstances of death, nickname, occupation, hometown or a photograph, is sometimes added. Shorter or exceptionally long texts have also been recorded, expressing the pain of the bereaved in simple prose or rhyme. A few have religious connotations. The memorials are mainly dedicated to males (78.4%^b) aged 20-29 (20.8%). The age of the deceased ranges from 2 to 91 but nearly half are under thirty (47.2%^c). Six exceptional cases are dedicated to more than one person, who happened to die together.^d

Despite the different ways in which the lives of the people commemorated ended, the memorials are of similar appearance. The only indications regarding the cause of death are occasionally given by the text inscribed on them, or by their particular location (e.g. on the river bank, or under the windows of an apartment-building). From the existing information on the memorials and from additional information provided by locals, at least 10% of the memorials do not relate to traffic accidents (including train and tram accidents). If only memorials not relating to automobile accidents are taken into account, this percentage rises to 16%. There may also be some ambiguity regarding the cause of death in the case of certain memorials situated away from the roadside. Furthermore, a few memorials situated by the roadside are dedicated to people involved in car-accidents, but who in fact ended up drowned in the nearby river. Similar ambiguity may be found in the case of people run over by trains, as this type of death is often associated with suicides.

Judging by the year of death inscribed on the memorials, the oldest memorial registered in Bucharest dates from 1974. In all, fifteen memorials (7.3% of the sample) were erected before 1989, confirming that the practice was on-going under communism. In that era, however, it was done in a rather discreet way, implying smaller and simpler monuments, mainly located at the periphery of the city, away from the eyes of officials and local authorities (Stahl, 2010). As in the case of other religious practices, the restrictive measures imposed by the communist regime were more visible in Bucharest than in other cities or remote rural areas, where these traditions continued unhindered.

^a Three others are commemorative plates and one is a lantern.

^b There are only 43 females among the deceased and in 19 cases the gender of the victim remains unknown. The percentage of males was calculated from the gender-identified cases (199). Because of the memorials dedicated to more than one person, the number of the deceased (218) exceeds the actual number of roadside memorials.

^c The last two percentages are calculated from the age-identified cases (197).

^d One memorial, in particular, is dedicated to seven young men (aged between 22 and 31).

4. Mortuary practices and beliefs in the case of sudden death

Current sudden death memorials in Bucharest must be situated and understood in a complex religious context, in which orthodox traditions regarding death are closely interlinked with remnants of ancient folk practices and beliefs of countrywide origin. Thus, they are part of the on-going lived urban Orthodoxy.

Marking the place of a sudden death with a cross appears to be an old and widespread custom in Romania. It is mentioned in folklore collections since the late nineteenth century, although historical sources have proven it to be much older.^e Crosses erected by family or friends of the deceased, were meant as a reminder of the tragedy but also had the function of keeping the devil - which one held responsible - away from that place, thus preventing recurrence (Marian, 1892, p. 349). The magnitude of the tragedy was in the fact that it concerned a particular kind of death: sudden, unexpected and therefore unprepared for. As in other traditional societies (Van Gennep, 2004, p. 160), these extraordinary circumstances were considered highly dangerous for the soul of the deceased, as well as for the community of the living. Sudden death was therefore deeply deplored and feared. The entire community would mourn those whose life had ended unexpectedly, since they had died alone, without anyone to light a candle for them. The presence of light was essential, as it was believed to clear the way for the soul into the world beyond, helping it to reach its Creator. In the absence of light, bad spirits could interfere, leading the soul away from the right path and thus causing it to wander the world of the living, disturbing it. This threat could be avoided only by the performance of specific rituals (Marian, 1892, pp. 24-34, pp. 349-350; Ciubotaru, 1999, pp. 47-48).

One could ask oneself to what extent ancient folk practices and beliefs are still actually present in Romanian contemporary society, especially in the urban environment. Since, at this point, it is too early to answer this question, suffice it to say for now that people who die without the necessary rituals are still treated with special concern in Bucharest. Thus, it is not uncommon to see expressions as 'unprepared dead', 'dead without light' or 'without a candle', 'dead without the last Eucharist and the last confession', or even 'dead in a car accident, without a candle and without the last Eucharist' mentioned in the *pomelnice* (lists of names handed over to the priest for the purposes of prayer). This practice, however, is not encouraged by the Church.

The unexpected nature of the deaths commemorated by memorials in Bucharest is not only a question of the way they occur, but also a question of age: in nearly half of the registered cases, the memorial pertains to young or very young people, which similarly implies an untimely death (Venbrux, 1991; Kligman, 1998). In traditional societies, dying before one's time, thus before accomplishing one's life, requires the performance of extraordinary funeral rituals, the widespread Romanian 'wedding of the dead' (Marian, 1892; Kligman, 1998) being no exception (Venbrux, 1991, p. 193). However, to what extent these are performed in relation to present day memorial victims in Bucharest, remains to be investigated.

Erecting a sudden death memorial in Bucharest is not always followed by an orthodox religious service. However, when this is the case, it is usually the priest from the nearest church who officiates, in the year following the tragedy. The service can later be repeated during the periodic commemorations which follow. Marking the place where someone died is, not compulsory under the doctrine of the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, erecting a cross is considered proof of Christian devotion and thus a meritorious gesture. No specific service for sudden death memorials is mentioned in religious textbooks. In this particular case, as in few others,^f the priests adapt their service for the occasion and choose what they consider to be suitable prayers. According to the priests interviewed, a shortened version of the funeral service is performed in this case. It begins with prayers meant to appease the soul of the deceased, followed by prayers meant to bless the cross raised in the

^e Foreign travelers were mentioning the numerous crosses encountered along Romanian roadsides as far back as the seventeenth century (e.g. Călători, 1973, 206; Călători 2001, 1247, 1291). Sometimes of impressive proportions, these crosses (at that time hand-carved locally in wood or stone) were invested with various functions, most often in relation to death and exceptionally to sudden death. In Bucharest, their number started to decrease with modernization and the massive urban changes at the end of the nineteenth century. The last ones were removed from their original sites under communism and transferred to museums and churchyards, where a few can still be found today.

^f Another widely spread practice nowadays in Romania is the blessing of cars or other vehicles (as is keeping religious items, such as icons and beads, next to the driver's seat). This is meant to protect the vehicle and thus prevent bad events like accidents or thefts from happening.

place where it left its body. As well as the cross raised at the grave, the sudden death memorial cross is invested with a protective function, in order to keep away “all visible or invisible enemies, all the actions and temptations of the devil” (Molitfelnic, 1975, pp. 281-283; Aghiazmatar, 1984, pp. 324-326). During the service, the cross, as well as the ground around it are passed over with incense (*tămâie*) and sprinkled with holy water (*aghiazmă*). This enhances their sacred character and would, according to the priests, justify surrounding them with a protective fence, meant to avoid possible damage and staining. Candles are burnt and ceremonial breads (*prescure*) are brought over, as well as the traditional wheat-grain porridge of the dead (*colivă*).

Numerous mortuary rituals are currently performed in Romania. Besides various local traditions, the Orthodox Church recommends periodic prayers, religious services and almsgivings, in the name of the deceased. These have to be carried out on specific dates. The rituals performed three, six, nine and forty days after death are considered to be the most important, as they relate to the journey of the soul in the world beyond⁸ (Măndiță, 1995, pp. 77-91). According to the Bible, soon after death the soul visits different familiar places on Earth (Măndiță, 1995, pp. 77-78). Specific Romanian folk beliefs referring to the wanderings of the soul vary (Marian, 1892, pp. 422-447); nevertheless, a few places are regularly mentioned: the soul returns to visit the house in which it lived during its lifetime, the place where it was separated from its body and the grave where the body lies. As these are emotionally charged places, it is believed that the soul might encounter difficulties in detaching itself from them, thus delaying its journey into the world beyond.

From the Church's point of view, the purpose of almsgivings is to bring more people to pray for the soul of the deceased. However, according to the general belief, everything that is given away on the occasion actually reaches the dead in the world beyond. It is believed that the soul of the departed continues to experience the same needs as during its lifetime: the soul gets thirsty, which is why, in various regions in Romania, as well as in Bucharest in earlier times, memorial crosses for the dead are located near wells or other water sources (Larionescu, 2000; Dorondel, 2004). The soul also experiences hunger, which is why, during commemorations, one offers food in almsgiving and/or organizes banquets. For the same reason, fruit trees (usually apple or plum trees) are planted next to the graves in cemeteries, feeding the souls of the dead with their fruit. In this regard it should also be noted that present day sudden-death memorials in Bucharest are often situated next to trees.

5. Conclusions

As Kennerly (2002, p. 239) pointed out, attention to the historicity of the practices engaged in at memorials brings unique insights into the cultural phenomenon discussed in this paper. Thus, it has become clear that, although fewer in number, sudden death memorials in Bucharest continued to be erected during the communist regime. Thereafter, their number suddenly increased as a result of the political changes of 1989 and the emotion raised within Romanian society by the tragic death of anti-communist victims. Compassion for the sudden loss of their young lives was soon extended to other victims. This created an emotional opening which encouraged the public commemoration of dead and the return to old traditions.

For all the victims of the 204 memorials registered in Bucharest, regardless of the circumstances, death occurred in a sudden way, in a location where it would not normally have been expected (i.e. at home or in hospitals). The memorials mark the place where it happened. This relates to old religious beliefs, as revealed by the fact that nearly all are crosses. Care for the deceased (i.e. what happens to their soul in the afterlife), is the main motivation behind the establishment of these memorials, which are part of pre-established mortuary rituals and one of the duties of the bereaved towards the dead which, once accomplished, also brings consolation in return. This justifies calling them ‘sudden death memorials’, a term that emphasizes their function in relation to this particular type of death.

⁸ The practice is based on the interpretation of the Bible: on the third day after death the soul ascends for the first time to heaven to meet the Creator and be submitted to His divine judgment. On the sixth day, the soul is allowed to visit paradise. On the ninth day, the soul meets the Creator for a second time, after which it is sent to visit hell. On the fortieth day, the soul meets the Creator for the third time and is subject to His final decision. This is the time of the individual judgment deciding the fate of the soul.

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